



Pedagogical Inspiration through Martial Arts Instruction

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Abstract

This article discusses how the martial arts studio can be used as a model for improved instruction for the classroom teacher. Four common teaching techniques, common to the martial arts classroom, are defined and described. They are (a) motivating by praise and recognition, (b) differentiating instruction, (c) using formative assessments, and (d) employing preventive discipline. Explanation and illustrations of how to generalize each technique for the academic classroom are also included.

Keywords: pedagogy, martial arts, praise, differentiated instruction, formative assessment, preventive discipline

Sources of Pedagogical Inspiration

There are numerous sources for pedagogical inspiration. Each source seems to focus on a different outcome. Teacher preparation programs concentrate on the fundamental skills and knowledge that a fledgling teacher needs prior to setting foot in the classroom. On the job training and discussions with colleagues provide teachers with hands-on, practical knowledge grounded

in experience. Professional journals provide readers with cutting edge research and recommendation regarding best practices. One under-utilized source of potential inspiration is the examination of teaching instruction in non-traditional environments.

Teaching and learning consistently occurs in any number of environments outside of the traditional academic school. Some of the best places to look for such pedagogical inspiration are among the thousands of private businesses that teach non-academic skills to individuals on a regular basis. Examples of such skills might include music, dance, and athletics. One such booming area of focus within the area of sports is martial arts training.

Martial Arts and Pedagogy

Martial arts are defined as: 'any of the traditional forms of Oriental self-defence or combat that utilize physical skill and coordination without weapons ('martial arts', Dictionary.com). Popular branches of martial arts, such as karate, tae-kwon do, and judo promise to help individuals gain confidence, improve focus, get in shape,

and learn to protect themselves.

In order to accomplish these objectives, martial arts instructors, or *sensei*, may use pedagogical techniques that appear unfamiliar or even strange to the uninitiated. The purpose of this article is to familiarize the reader with some instructional conventions common to the martial arts classroom, or *dojo*, that can be generalized to the academic classroom. The four pedagogic topics to be discussed are (a) motivating by praise and recognition, (b) differentiating instruction, (c) using formative assessments, and (d) employing preventive discipline.

Motivating by Praise and Recognition

One of the most well-known aspects of traditional martial arts training is the belt system. Often beginning students start with a white-coloured belt to tie around the waist of their uniform, or *gi*. As the student progresses, he is awarded with various coloured belts associated with particular accomplishments. Usually, the last and most prestigious coloured belt, the black, is awarded to those students who demonstrate the highest levels of dedication, skill and knowledge.

Belt tests are scheduled on a frequent basis. Each student goes into the test knowing exactly what is expected of him in order to pass to the next level. Often, a formal advancement ceremony is held soon after testing to publically recognize students for their accomplishments. Martial arts students are often recognized in other ways, such as certificates or medals for consistent attendance, and dojo privileges, such as allowing advanced students to lead warm-up exercises. Regardless of the particular incentive, martial arts studios understand that the keys to student motivation are to award praise specifically and frequently.

Classroom teachers have long recognized the importance of positive reinforcement (Skinner 1953). Items such as stickers, gold stars, and candy have all been used and abused over the years in an attempt to shape student behaviour. However, best practices suggest that positive reinforcement, particularly praise, is much more effective when it follows two rules, (1.) students know the exact behaviour that earned praise, and (2.) the praise is administered very soon after the particular behaviour (Sutherland, Wehby & Yoder 2002).

For example, a primary school student might be learning to print letters of the alphabet. Best practices suggest that the teacher introduces specific feedback such as, 'You are doing a nice job with keeping your lines straight' as soon as the child has displayed the desired action. By doing so, the student knows exactly what she did to earn recognition, and is much more likely to repeat the desired behaviour in the near future.

Differentiating Instruction

The composition of the traditional martial arts class may be a surprise for the first time observer. Most classes are not typically segregated by age, gender, size, or ability level. The forty-five year old man with a black belt is

expected to practice alongside the nine year old girl taking her first class.

In the dojo, unity and cooperation are highly valued. There are three different scenarios for instructional activities that may occur during the average class. Some activities, such as push-ups and stretches, can be completed by the entire class. Other activities may involve everyone practicing a certain skill, like a kick, but with the sensei adjusting the complexity based upon the students' belt level and experience. A third, less prevalent, set of activities involves students breaking up into groups based on belt level to work on moves relevant to their present ability. Throughout the entire class, it is emphasized that everyone comes to the dojo to learn and to improve. Fellow students are seen as fellow travellers in the journey towards martial arts mastery.

The myriad of activities described above may be best described as a form of differentiated instruction. Differentiated instruction (DI) is defined as, 'a teacher's reacting responsively to a student's needs' (Tomlinson, & Demirsky Allen, 2000). DI recognizes that each student has unique experiences, strengths, and challenges when it comes to learning, and adjusts accordingly. DI is a recommended practice for many different sub-groups of students including gifted students (Tomlinson *et al.* 2004), students with learning disabilities (Bender, 2008), students with intellectual disabilities (Wehmeyer, Lance, & Bashinski 2002), and those that are English Language learners.

There are several methods that a teacher can use to individualize a lesson to meet the needs of her students (Tomlinson 2001). She may differentiate content (what is taught), process (how it is taught), or products (how students demonstrate mastery). Unfortunately, there is no 'magic instruction book' to dictate to teachers which particular technique will work best with which particular student. Although differentiation is often a matter of trial and error, continued practice and experience can lead to increased learning and greater success.

Using Formative Assessments

Martial arts students are formally tested on their knowledge and skills on a regular basis. In order to advance in rank, students are required to demonstrate what they know, not only to their sensei, but often times to an impartial panel of judges and an invited audience of family and friends. To the casual observer, belt tests are a highly stressful environment.

However, the majority of students are calm and focused. They go through their moves with great precision and skill. Most are recognized for their efforts by being advanced to a higher level. Some of this success can be directly attributed to intense practice and long work. Yet, student confidence and assurance may stem from another source.

The sensei wants all of his students to succeed as much as possible. One way for this to happen is to ensure that

students are extremely prepared prior to testing. In the weeks leading up to the exam, the sensei meets individually with each student. He may require them to demonstrate the same set of skills that will be required for a promotion.

Students are given specific feedback and told exactly what they need to improve upon prior to the test. Some *dojos* go so far as to 'sign off' on students stating that they were able to successfully demonstrate required skills. In doing so, students receive the acknowledgement and confidence that they are fully prepared. The promotion test, therefore, becomes much less about proving ability, and more about replicating skills already mastered.

The evaluation techniques described above are examples of formative assessments. Formative assessments are concerned with 'feedback'. It is 'ongoing', 'dynamic', and 'used to make decisions regarding future learning' (Chappius & Chappius 2008). Instructors can utilize this technique to shape student performance in a number of ways. Activities such as warm-up questions, timed drills, homework assignment and classroom games are all recommended strategies to gauge learning and to prepare students for final (summative) assessments.

Employing Preventive Discipline

Learning martial arts requires familiarity with an entirely new set of traditions, procedures, and routines that are unfamiliar to most beginners. Examples of such activities common to the dojo include taking your shoes off upon entering the building, bowing as a sign of respect, and responding to simple commands spoken in a foreign language. Beginning students naturally struggle in remembering all that is required in this new environment. When this occurs, students are rarely punished for their mistakes. Most sensei prefer to utilize some form of preventive discipline instead.

Preventive discipline, or pre-correction is a series of brief prompts, questions, statements, and gestures used with a student prior to when a predicted misbehavior usually occurs (Jolivet, Alter, Scott, Josephs, & Swoszowski, 2013). Preventive discipline asserts that it is more valuable to teach, rehearse, and remind beforehand, rather than punish afterward. For example, prior to entering the dojo, the sensei and student may stop at the doorway. The sensei asks, 'What are we supposed to do before entering the classroom?' He may then pause and wait for the student to respond, either verbally or by demonstrating the appropriate action. If the student does not know, or responds incorrectly, the sensei knows that this skill needs to be re-taught in more depth.

Classroom teachers can use preventive discipline in many ways. For example, they might remind students to write down their homework assignment in their agenda books prior to leaving for the day. This brief reminder reinforces teacher expectations, and keeps the desired

behaviour fresh in their mind immediately before school departure. Another way that teachers may use preventive discipline is to remind the class of school expectations as they apply to going to lunch. Simple prompts such as 'no running', 'inside voices', and 'hands to yourself' prior to leaving the classroom state school expectations in a non-intrusive manner and diminish the need for many punitive strategies.

Final Thoughts

Martial arts' training contains a number of pedagogical resources that an academic teacher could incorporate into their own classroom. These techniques stress discipline, respect, and a student-centred approach. They also represent some of the most valued, but least reported dispositions in our modern public schools.

As a final note, it must be stated that these practices are based upon the observations of the author, and are not implied to be universally accepted by all *dojos*. The reader is encouraged to visit a local martial arts studio for more information and further instruction.

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